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Guaging Student Levels of Comfort and Approachability

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An Ethnography of Parkland College: Gauging Student Levels of Comfort and Approachability

For our ethnography, my classmates Klairyn Karmazinas, Remy Kaskel, and I decided to conduct a qualitative study on the approachability of strangers, especially in regards to how comfortable someone feels when been approached by someone of their own demographics versus very different demographics. We looked specifically at age, gender, and ethnicity. At the beginning of our project, we hypothesized that Parkland students and faculty would either display a lot of openness to diversity, or they would be close-minded. However, our data proved to demonstrate a mixture of results, as well as more complicated themes. We concluded that students and faculty members at Parkland feel that they are open to diversity, but we noticed that most people were either cautious of everyone in general or had slight preferences toward people of certain demographics, usually their own.

In order to gather our data, we used participant observation, surveys, and interviews. We watched people and their interactions in the Parkland student union at the busiest time of the day, around lunch time. We went up to groups of people and asked quick survey questions. We also conducted interviews with four different individuals, 2 female and 2 male, all of diverse ages and ethnicities. We asked questions such as, “What is your ethnicity, age, and gender?”, “Would you feel more comfortable being approached by someone with similar demographics to your or different?”, “Is your comfort level with diversity influenced by your upbringing?”, and “Outside

of Parkland, do you find your social life similar to your own demographics or is there diversity?” Reflexivity also played an important role in data gathering. As a fellow Parkland student, I believe that I was able to get more honest and genuine answers from the students and faculty. By introducing ourselves as students conducting a project, the people that we questioned let down their guard a little. If we hadn’t introduced ourselves this way, they might have been uncomfortable and wondered why we were asking them questions, creating barriers between us. However, because we chose strangers to interview and survey, this also could have influenced our interactions, although it is hard to say exactly how.

One of our most important tools for gathering data was participant observation. In our study, we used participant observation in the student union at Parkland during the busiest time of the day. In one of our assigned readings, Elizabeth P. Challinor describes participant observation in her article “Sensory Ways of Knowing”, as “a form of data that distinguishes anthropology from other social sciences” (par. 12). She explains that through participant observation and her field notes, she channels not only hard facts, but also a sense of her experience and the “vibes” that she felt. She describes herself as a “participant absorber” (par. 5). Challinor argues that other quantitative-type research methods create a different category of data, one which lacks the substance of emotion and intimacy (par. 9). Challinor’s article focuses on how participant observation has power as both a research method and a personal experience, describing it as “an art” (par. 19).

Like Challinor’s article emphasizes, our use of participant observation allowed us to gather important data and experience Parkland’s unique culture. We noticed some important details about how people chose to interact with each other. We saw that most people who sat together shared some specific demographic feature, usually age, gender, ethnicity, or a mixture

of all three. If they didn't share an obvious demographic feature, we surveyed them and found that they sat together based on mutual interest. Many were from the same classes or clubs. Participant observation also allowed us to notice that people didn't really interact much with other strangers. They mostly seemed comfortable talking to their friends. Similar to Challinor's article, we found that participant observation was an experience as much as a research method. As Parkland students, my group members and I fit in, and it allowed us to gain a deeper sense of understanding. Because we had all been to the union before, we already had a sense of what we expected to see.

While tools are important for gathering data, we learned another important aspect of our research methods. Our class reading, "Theory in Cultural Anthropology" by Robert Lavenda emphasizes the importance of situated knowledge, which calls researchers to take into account their own position in their data gathering. Situated knowledge can help readers to have a better context for understanding an anthropologist's claims (236). Lavenda gives the example of two ethnographers studying the same culture. If one ethnographer were only able to study adult males, and the other adult females, this situated knowledge would be provided to the reader. It would help the reader understand that the research is not at odds with each other, but rather the result of two different viewpoints (236-237). Lavenda adds, "readers would not have to decide that only one ethnography was telling the 'true story'; perhaps no single ethnography can capture the 'whole truth' about any way of life" (237).

In the same way, the situated knowledge for our research is that we had certain limitations. We only studied Parkland students and faculty, and we only observed interactions at Parkland. Our small ethnography was only able to encompass three distinct demographic features and interview only four people. Additionally, as students, we were perceived and spoken

to in a certain way. Our identities as young women probably influenced how people interacted with us. If any of these details were different, such as having a larger study or being a more diverse group of researchers, we could have come up with vastly different results. Providing this information helps keep the reader informed and able to make accurate comparisons with research from other ethnographers.

In our research, we found some recurring themes that were more complex than our original hypotheses predicted. One of them relates to Jane H. Hill's "Language, Race, and White Public Space". In her article, Hill describes a study on the uses of Spanish by Puerto Ricans and white people. She discusses how Puerto Ricans in New York City experience two different spheres of language. In their inner sphere, in places such as the home or communal spaces with other Puerto Ricans, Spanish and English are spoken easily and interchangeably. However, Hill points out that in the outer sphere, Puerto Ricans feel forced to speak English strictly and properly. This causes anxiety and a desire to stay silent. Hill argues that these Spanish speakers are ostracized if they are unable to speak English in an orderly way. They even feel uncomfortable with their accents, afraid of being looked down upon (681). Hill points out that while whites are the ones that strictly enforce the outer sphere of correct and orderly English for Spanish-speakers, they themselves use Spanish in a blatantly incorrect manner. This "mock Spanish" can be offensive to Spanish-speakers who feel marginalized in the outer sphere, or white public space (682).

While our study did not deal specifically with Spanish-speakers, we dealt with race and public space. Hill's article highlights white public spaces as areas dominated by whites, who make the atmosphere hostile to anything but mainstream American English (681). Just as the Puerto Ricans in Hill's study felt uncomfortable in certain areas, my classmates and I wanted to

uncover ideas about the theme of comfortability. When we asked students and faculty members if they had any preference toward what an approaching stranger's demographics were, we found that many people cared more about the context of the situation. If the stranger asked them a question, they would want to know what questions and why they were asking. They would not feel comfortable in some situations, but in others, they would. Like Hill's article shows, background and circumstances can have a direct influence on how a person feels. Hill's article also shows that racism can stem from the idea of white being the "norm" and other ethnicities being irregular (684). At Parkland, almost everyone we interviewed seemed open to diversity, rejecting the idea of white normality, perhaps because of Parkland's diverse environment.

Our study showed that many people felt open to diversity but were more sensitive to other details of the person approaching them. These point to a persistent theme that approachability is mainly dependent upon context. One of our class readings, "Talk in the Intimate Relationship: His and Hers" by Deborah Tannen, discusses interactions between men and women. A main focus of her article is metamessages, the implied or underlying message that people send by means other than directly saying it. These can come in the form of body language, behavior, or physical features. She argues that women are more prone to using metamessages than men are. These two types of communication can create relational barriers, as one side communicates indirectly and the other directly (115).

In our study, our subjects indicated that the metamessages a person sends can influence the way they feel about the person. Some of those who answered our questions didn't want to be approached by someone who "smell[ed] bad" or looked abnormal or strange, or it just depended on the individual. One of our interviewees stated that "intuition" plays a role in how comfortable he feels around strangers. Some people we questioned said they would act differently toward

people depending on how the strangers behaved, another type of metamessage. Tannen's article also describes the consequences of missing metamessage cues (117). Some of our subjects stated that they were cautious of everyone, regardless of demographics or physical features. This could stem from the fear of missing critical metamessages, in the worst case scenario of a stranger intending harm.

Overall, we found that people at Parkland were seemingly open to diversity, although many had slight preferences toward similar demographics or were cautious of all strangers. However, when delving into more complex themes, the most important thing we discovered was that age, gender, and ethnicity played only one part in determining the comfort level of a person being approached. Other factors, such as context, situation, physical appearance, and body language can all influence the way a person feels. Even so, when people of the same demographics meet, there is a "connection" as one of our interviewees mentioned, that helps bring the two strangers to a certain level of trust.

More questions and methods could be added in order to continue research on the topic of approachability and comfort levels. A researcher could survey more people in a variety of places in order to gain more comprehensive results. Because many people thought that their response depended on the situation, researchers could come up with a very specific situation and use it to question everyone. In our research, we didn't have a very specific situation to present to our interviewees. This topic could also easily branch off in many different directions. In continuing research, one could take into account other factors such as body type, class, wardrobe, and body language. A researcher could even take one of these components and test people's perceptions based on it. These multi-faceted elements can have a major impact on a person's opinion about a stranger.

Works Cited

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